

Our passion for roasts is bad for animals, bad for people and bad for the planet,
says **Tony Banks MP**

Why all meat should be condemned

ALTHOUGH I now describe myself as a vegetarian, the habit is relatively recent, I was brought up on a diet of meat and two veg and as a kid tucked with relish into stuffed hearts, pie and mash, liver and bacon and masses of beef, Chicken was a luxury and our Sunday evening treat was a huge pile of toast and dripping covered with salt, In those days, if I had even heard of vegetarianism I would probably have considered it abnormal.

The change was gradual. First I gave up veal, then pork, then red meat before I finally arrived at my current state of grace where even the smell of raw or cooking meat disgusts me. I am unable to remember precisely when the process started, but I am fairly certain the impetus was animal welfare. It is, after all, difficult to reconcile concern for animals with eating them. Of course, not all animal lovers are vegetarians, nor all vegetarians animal lovers. But since so much animal suffering is caused by factory farming, it is not easy for the average consumer to feel confident the meat he or she eats is cruelty-free. Recent developments in meat production have attempted to address this concern, but it is too little too late.

The other driving force in my change to vegetarianism was a health concern. Here the arguments are not based on morality but on enlightened self-interest. As I somewhat understated in the House of Commons during a debate on vegetarianism: "If people wish to eat meat and run the risk of dying a horrible, lingering, hormone-induced death after sprouting extra breasts and large amounts of hair, it is, of course, entirely up to them." Since that debate two years ago, events have definitely moved us closer towards that grotesque image, if not entirely justified my satire.

I can recollect countless assurances from sundry ministers that there was no

danger to humans from BSE. I don't know whether ministers were being naive or cynical but, in either case, they were and remain totally untrustworthy when it comes to food safety. Politicians are not expected to be experts on anything very much, but only fools could have failed to realise that feeding animal protein to grass-eaters was a gross interference with nature and that eventually there would be a high price to pay. That price has been Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease and when this health scare has passed, others will replace it, simply because for too long we have flouted the laws of nature.

Food safety comes a poor second to food profit. Meat eating will never be safe. There will always be risks originating either from its production or its processing. Faecal contamination is endemic in slaughterhouses; animals catching the stench of death as they wait to die naturally piss and shit themselves. Humans in similar circumstances do precisely the same.

Anyone who has seen the blood and gore in an abattoir and pitied the terrified animals will probably have been put off meat for life. The conditions in a battery farm for chickens or pigs challenge our right to call ourselves humane. In the name of meat production, we slaughter some 700 million animals in this country every year and before doing so, inflict pain, misery and suffering on most of them.

Against this background of unhygienic brutality the vegetarian options are far more efficient, far more healthy and far safer. Little wonder so many thousands are turning to vegetarianism every week.

There is a mass of statistical evidence, especially from the USA, to prove that a vegetarian diet saves lives and vast amounts of money through fewer demands on health services. Cancer is one of

95 Western society's greatest killers and
research shows that up to 60 per cent of
cancers are attributable to diet. A study
in Germany found that vegetarian men
faced less than half the risk of death from
100 cancer and vegetarian women about 25
per cent lower risk when compared with
non-vegetarians. In this country, heart
disease and cancer are our biggest killers
and vegetarians suffer far less from both
105 than their meat-eating peers. Of all food
poisoning, 95 per cent originates from the
consumption of animal products and as
a result, meat eaters cost the NHS more
and take more days off work than
110 vegetarians. Not only do veggies tend to
live longer, they also look better, being, on
average, some 10 per cent leaner than
omnivores - a point worth making as the
Government sets targets to reduce
115 obesity.

But the arguments for vegetarianism
go beyond personal health and animal
welfare considerations. Meat
production creates serious environ-
120 mental problems. Many of the worst
water pollution incidents reported to the
National Rivers Authority each year are
due to slurry and sewage from livestock.
Moreover, livestock flatulence is the
125 single largest source of methane
emission in the United Kingdom which
adds to the greenhouse effect. Meat pro-
duction uses far more fossil fuels than the
production of fruit and vegetables.
130 Although some 85 per cent of Britain's
agricultural land is used for meat pro-
duction, obtaining protein from meat is
very inefficient. Ten kilograms of vegetable
protein fed to livestock will produce 1
135 kilogram of meat protein. Meat protein
produced on 10 hectares of land will feed
only two people, while soya protein
grown on the same area would feed 60
140 people. In a world where millions do not
have enough to eat, it is obscene that
some 38 per cent of all crops are fed to
animals to produce meat, most of which
is then consumed by the industrialised
145 deserts and deforestation through over-
grazing and you begin to calculate the
real cost of that hamburger or steak.

The arguments for vegetarianism are
powerful and yet the habit is still only

150 embraced by a minority, albeit a growing
number, of the total population. Part of
the reason for this lies in those years of
accumulated prejudice against
vegetarianism. Vegetarians are still
155 treated by some as though our choice
were a disability. Stereotypes linger and
the image of the veggie as an eccentric
nerd in an anorak and woolly hat has not
gone away. Nor has its opposite, the
160 "real men eat meat" image so
assiduously fostered by the industry.

However, I detect change in the air.
The meat-eating habit has suffered a
succession of serious blows to its image
165 from which it seems unlikely to recover.
Veggies are on the march. Our food is
exciting, varied, cruelty-free and safe. I am
convinced that in years to come we will
regard eating animal flesh in the same
170 light as we now regard cannibalism.